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ABSTRACT

Higher standards in public schools have made it necessary for educational reformers to identify at-risk students and to develop effective programs for preventing their failure. This pamphlet begins by delineating the characteristics of at-risk students and discussing evaluation instruments that are useful for identifying such students. Successful programs for helping at-risk students provide a broad range of special services to assist in raising these students' low self-esteem through frequent personal contact with a qualified, caring staff. During a period of federal cutbacks in education (11 percent between 1980 and 1987), there has been a 20 percent increase in the numbers of disadvantaged students. The educational reform movement's push for higher graduation standards is resulting in a record high dropout rate. (TE)

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AT-RISK STUDENTS

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Nationally over 25 percent of the potential high school graduates drop out before graduation. In some major cities the rate is 40 percent. Higher standards in the public schools have affected millions of minority and disadvantaged students who are "at-risk." Educational reform has changed the rules before the system has had a chance to accommodate to an increasing number of students who are dropping out and becoming a burden to society. The identification of at-risk students and the development of programs to prevent their failure are needed components of educational reform.

What are the characteristics of at-risk students?

At-risk students are students who are not experiencing success in school and are potential dropouts. They are usually low academic achievers who exhibit low self-esteem. Disproportionate numbers of them are males and minorities. Generally they are from low socioeconomic status families. Students who are both low income and minority status are at higher risk; their parents may have low educational backgrounds and may not have high educational expectations for their children.

At-risk students tend not to participate in school activities and have a minimal identification with the school. They have disciplinary and truancy problems that lead to credit problems. They exhibit impulsive behavior and their peer relationships are problematic. Family problems, drug addictions, pregnancies, and other problems prevent them from participating successfully in school. As they experience failure and fall behind their peers, school becomes a negative environment that reinforces their low self-esteem.

How can they be identified, and at which age?

Some evaluation instruments that have been used in identifying potential dropouts include the Elementary School Pupil Adjustment Scale (ESPAS) for identifying poorly adjusted students in grades K-3, the Dropout Alert Scale (DAS) for grades 4-12, and the Student Sensitivity Index (SSI) for grades 7-12 (see Cage and others 1984).

At-risk students need to be identified as early as possible and regularly reevaluated because their family status and living situations can change. Some researchers believe that the roots of at-risk behavior begin in the elementary grades with low achievement patterns, high absenteeism, and low self-esteem. Programs identifying and working with at-risk students are needed at every grade level. Teachers should be well trained and alert to the symptoms of at-risk student behavior, and administrative staff should be responsive to their needs. It is especially important that teachers dealing with minority students have training in language and cultural differences. Schools need to be a model for equal opportunity and a place where the individual's needs for achievement and positive experiences can be met. The needs of minority students, low income students, and students with special problems must be addressed.

What kinds of programs are effective in helping at-risk students?

Successful programs often separate at-risk students from other students, they relate work to education, are small, have low student-to-teacher ratios, and provide counseling and supportive services. Most programs emphasize flexibility, tailoring curriculum to the learning needs of the individual students. They are often innovative, providing alternatives to traditional promotion policies, structuring curriculum in nontraditional ways, offering early childhood education programs, and including vocational education in alternative settings.

Effective programs are involved in a broad range of special services to help at-risk students improve their low self-esteem while providing a supportive system in which they can begin to have positive experiences. These include remediation programs, tutoring, child care services, medical care, substance abuse awareness programs, bilingual instruction, employment training, and

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close followup procedures on truancy and absenteeism.

Finally, successful programs are service-intensive; they provide students personal contact with a qualified, caring staff. Schools often work with the community to identify at-risk students and to instruct parents on how to help their at-risk children.

The New Haven Schools Project (CT) is an innovative nineteen-year-old project in the New Haven elementary schools. Administrators, parents, teachers, and support staff work collaboratively to provide at-risk students a climate in which they are able to become successful. Achievement levels have been raised while attendance and behavior problems have been lowered. One school originally ranking thirty-third citywide now ranks third in achievement. The New Haven Schools Project has successfully motivated at-risk students to achieve at a higher level academically and socially (Comer 1987).

How does the current push for excellence affect at-risk students?

Federal financial support for education fell 11 percent between 1980-87 while the numbers of disadvantaged students grew nationwide by 20 percent. During the same period the educational reform movement has diverted funds from elementary and middle schools to high school reform programs. Many more students are currently at-risk than ever before while educational standards are rising nationwide.

Stricter standards for high school graduation in Florida have produced the largest percentage of dropouts (38 percent) in a state nationwide. When the graduation requirement of a 1.5 gradepoint average takes effect in 1987 the dropout rate is expected to rise even higher.

Recognizing that higher standards impose a "forbidding barrier" rather than a challenge for at-risk students, the Governors' Task Force on Readiness has prepared a national "action agenda" for states to follow to help at-risk students meet higher educational standards. Among other initiatives, the task force recommended "establishing a mechanism for state intervention when school districts fail to make progress with low-achieving students," and developing incentives for "effective school and classroom procedures and practices" (quoted by Riley 1986).

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